WOMEN AND THE EPISCOPATE

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The purpose of this article is not to argue the theological reasons either for or against the consecration of women as bishops in the Episcopal Church. It is not even to argue the legal and constitutional ramifications of such a proposal. It is, instead, a view of the "oughtness" of such consecrations.

An old maxim declares, "We are not obligated to do everything we are at liberty to do". That maxim is of supreme importance in the whole complex question of women in the episcopate.

It should be made perfectly clear that there are many different issues in the matter. Objections to such ordinations are based on arguments drawn from Scripture, Tradition, Doctrine and Reason, as well as from Canon Law. However, on these matters there is a very strong difference of opinion in the Church. In the words of the Committee on Theology of the House of Bishops:

> As a Committee, we believe that there are arguments against the ordination of women to the . . . episcopate as well as arguments for such ordination. Therefore, we believe that such risk as is involved in such ordination should be incurred only as we are an ecclesial community first in sufficient (i.e. constitutionally-authorized) agreement among ourselves.

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> In sacramental action for the Church we must act as a Church, for the sacraments belong to the Church as a whole, not to individuals or to individual Dioceses. As Anglicans, besides acting consistently with our own constitutional structure as an autonomous Church, we must also act consistently with our membership in the Anglican Communion. (Journal of 1976, pp. B-253, B-254.)

In other words, there are actually <u>two</u> questions which must be answered in regard to women as bishops: (1) <u>Can</u> women be bishops? (2) <u>Ought</u> women be bishops? For the sake of this paper only, we shall assume that the answer to the first question is to be answered either "yes" or "maybe"; for if the answer is "no", then we can never reach the second question.

For Anglicans, theological issues are to be determined by reference to what Richard Hooker called the three-fold golden cord of Scripture, Tradition and Reason.

In regard to Scripture as authority, Article VI of the Articles of Religion declares: "Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed, as an article of the Faith". Article XX states that "although the Church be a witness and a keeper of Holy Writ, yet, as it ought not to decree any thing against the same, so besides the same ought it not to enforce any thing to be believed for necessity of Salvation".

To put it another way, we cannot require acceptance of anything not taught or proved from Scripture, and we cannot allow anything which is forbidden by Scripture.

What, then, does Scripture tell us in regard to women in the episcopate? There is no clear answer. Indeed, nowhere can one read "women can be bishops" or "women cannot be bishops". While it is true that arguments are made on both sides from Scripture, the fact is that Scripture does not definitively answer the question.

In 1968, Lambeth Conference observed:

> The appeal to Scripture and tradition deserve to be taken with the utmost seriousness. To disregard what we have received from the apostles, and the inheritance of Catholic Christendom, would be most inappropriate for a Church for which the authority of Scripture and tradition stands high.
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> Nevertheless the data of Scripture appear divided on this issue (of female ordination). (Lambeth Conference 1968 Resolutions and Reports, p. 106.)

Even our sister Roman Communion, in reviewing the matter, arrived at the same conclusion:

> This brings us to a fundamental observation: we must not expect the New Testament on its own to resolve in a clear fashion the question of the possibility of women acceding to the (ordained ministry), in the same way that it does not on its own enable us to give an account of certain sacraments, especially of the structure of the sacrament of Order. (Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood, p. 24.)

Where Scripture does not answer the question in a definitive way, we are directed to Tradition. What has the Tradition of the Church to say on this question?

Again, the 1968 Lambeth Conference observed " that the tradition flowing from the early Fathers and the medieval Church (is) that a woman is incapable of receiving Holy Orders". (Lambeth Reports, supra.) This is also what our Roman brethren observed in the above quoted Declaration.

If, then, Scripture does not on its own answer the question, and if Tradition is against the ordination and consecration of female bishops, is there any possibility of change in that Tradition?

Lambeth Conference did indicate the possibility of change in its 1968 Report. Again quoting from page 106 of the Report:

> The element of sexuality in the Godhead and its implication for the sex of the priesthood are complex and debatable matters. We acknowledge God as father and we worship the incarnate Lord as man. No theologian has ever understood this to mean that God is male. There is great significance in the ancient imagery of the bishop or priest as father to his family or as representing Christ the bridegroom to the Church, his bride. This is an image of unquestionable value, a profound pointer to the truth. But the truth to which it points has been expressed with equal power by St. Paul in referring to his own relation to the Galatian church as that of a mother again in travail with her children (Gal. 4.19).
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> In view of the above considerations, are we to conclude that it nevertheless inheres in the very nature of the gospel that women are intrinsically incapable of receiving ordination . . . ?

Coupled with that observation, the Conference observed that the Tradition may have been based on assumptions about the nature of women which are not valid today. The Conference then concluded:

> If the ancient and medieval assumptions about the social role and inferior status of women are no longer accepted, the appeal to tradition is virtually reduced to the observation that there happens to be no precedent for ordaining women . . . The New Testament does not encourage Christians to think that nothing should be done for the first time.

If Tradition may be subject to change, how may that change be identified as legitimate and of the Holy Spirit, and not just of the spirit of the age?

A basic understanding is grasped along the following lines: If Scripture is silent, we must look to Tradition. However, that Tradition may be subject to change if the proposed change is neither contrary to Scripture nor contrary to the mind of the Church. The mind of the Church is determined by a consensus fidelium based on the third strand of the golden cord, Reason.

This consensus fidelium, derived from Reason, is defined for us in the Report of the Commission on Christian Doctrine appointed in 1922. At page 35 of the Report, we read:

> The Church's understanding of the Gospel is continually renewed by its experience of communion with God through Christ; and the authority of its doctrinal formulations ought always to be interpreted as resting, at least in part, upon the acceptance of these by the whole body of the faithful. This authority, in so far as it is derived from such a consensus fidelium, rests upon the range and quality of the manifold experience which that consensus gathers up, and upon the witness which, alike in the devotional and other practice of Christians generally and in the doctrine of the theologians, it bears to the truth of the Gospel. The weight of the consensus fidelium does not depend on mere numbers or on the extension of a belief at any one time, but on continuance through the ages and the extent to which the consensus is genuinely free.

The Commission warned that "In respect of the exercise of discipline within such limits as the above resolutions recognise, great regard should be paid to the need for securing a free consensus, as distinct from an enforced uniformity."

Indeed, the 1978 Lambeth Conference recognized the problem of consensus in regard to women bishops. Resolution 22 of the Conference states:

> While recognizing that a member Church of the Anglican Communion may wish to consecrate a woman to the episcopate, and accepting that such member Church must act in accordance with its own constitution, the conference recommends that no decision to consecrate be taken without consultation with the episcopate through the primates and overwhelming support in any member Church and in the diocese concerned, lest the bishop's office should become a cause of disunity instead of a focus of unity.

This clearly reflects the concern expressed by the Committee on Theology of the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church quoted in the opening paragraphs of this paper.

The 1978 Lambeth Conference felt that the matter of consensus, or "overwhelming support" for the election and consecration of a woman bishop was so important, that the Report of the Conference included the sage observations of Professor John Macquarrie as a special Appendix to the Report. While lengthy, his comments, recorded at pages 117 and 118 of the Report, bear repeating here:

> Next we come to the question of a consensus. It cannot mean everyone thinking alike. Theology is a dialectical science, so that every minority view has its elements of truth and justification. The majority view needs the constant stimulation and correction of the minority view if it is to remain alive and seek deeper truth. A measure of pluralism is today an acceptable and healthy state of affairs within the Church. The liberty of pluralism is possible only because there are wide areas of agreement. This is especially the case where we are concerned not only with belief but practice. The ordination of women to the priesthood and episcopate is such a novel step that it does seem to me to demand a large measure of consensus if it is not to provoke very deep division and even schism. In practical terms, I should think such a consensus could be understood as the two-thirds majority required in many bodies for radical changes, and that this consensus should obtain severally among the bishops, clergy, and lay people. I believe also that where such a consensus is present, many of those who had previously opposed the change will accept that it represents the mind of the Church, perhaps even the leading of the Holy Spirit, and will go along. Here one is obviously thinking of some particular national or regional Church, and in the first instance a consensus has to be sought within such a Church. But the question does arise whether on such an important and potentially divisive issue as the ordination of women . . . , one should not look for a consensus beyond that of the national or regional Church. It is true of course that within the Anglican Communion, each constituent Church is autonomous. But I must confess that I am not much impressed with the idea of an autonomous Church. This is especially the case at a time when we hear a great deal of talk about collegiality, partnership, conciliarity, and so on. If these are not just empty words that are bandied about, if they stand for a real desire to share experience and decision-making, then each so-called autonomous Church ought to be in constant consultation with its sister Churches. On the particular matter with which we are concerned today, it would surely have been wise if individual Churches had deferred action until this Lambeth Conference of 1978.

The concern expressed by Professor Macquarrie underlines precisely what the Lambeth Conference expressed in its Resolution 22.

Where Scripture does not give a clear answer, and Tradition is negative, an affirmative answer in favor of such consecrations can be given only when there is a clear and unambiguous consensus in favor of those consecrations. What is the extent to which a consensus on this subject within the Anglican Communion, and the Episcopal Church, exists?

It should be noted that only two Provinces of the Anglican Communion have formally indicated an intention to elect woman bishops. However, of the 29 jurisdictions in the Anglican Communion, 16 have voted on the question of women in the priesthood. Of those 16, four have voted "yes" and 12 have voted "no". Since 1976, seven Provinces have voted on the matter, with one "yes" vote and six "no" votes. 13% of all Anglicans live in Provinces which have voted "yes", 13% live in Provinces which have not voted, and 74% live in Provinces which have refused to authorize such ordinations. Of course, within each of these Provinces, there are a number of communicants who hold either viewpoint. Nevertheless, the present status of the issue in the Anglican Communion clearly does not reflect any <u>consensus fidelium</u> for such a change.

Even in the Episcopal Church, there is yet no real consensus. Of the 134 domestic and foreign dioceses of the Episcopal Church, 40% do not have any women priests. Of the nine extra-provincial or territorial jurisdictions, only one has women priests. Further, in 1986, The Living Church surveyed its readers and found that just under 51% favored women's ordinations. Again, this does not represent anything like a consensus, or the "overwhelming support" seen by Lambeth Conference as a prerequisite for consecration of a woman bishop.

In the absense of any such consensus, it is most obvious that to elect and consecrate a woman bishop at this juncture runs the clear risk of making the bishop's office "a cause of disunity instead of a focus of unity", to quote Resolution 22 of Lambeth, and may well "provoke very deep division and even schism" in the words of Professor Macquarrie.

In conclusion, even if we determine that women can be bishops, we ought not to consecrate a woman bishop until and unless there is the undoubted consensus for such a novel action. The mind of the Church has not yet indicated a change from the two thousand year Tradition against such a proposal.